

Scientific Life

AN ANNIVERSARY OF AN INSTITUTION – A REPORT ON THE “TEACHING ECONOMICS FOR 90 YEARS” CONFERENCE

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A conference titled “Teaching Economics for 90 Years” took place from 16th to 18th September 2009 at the University of Economics (UE) in Prague. The conference was organised by the Department of Institutional Economics within the Faculty of Economics and Public Administration (FEPA) at the UE, and generously financially supported by a Czech bank ČSOB. The aim of the conference was to commemorate a very important anniversary for the university. It was in September 1919 when the very first course in economics taught at an independent university was opened. Remembering this event is highly appropriate as it encompasses the history of the institution itself, the forming of Czech economic thinking and the beginning of economics studies as an independent subject at a university level in the Czech lands. It was a good opportunity to return back to the events and figures closely linked to the birth of the university, but also to those to whom the Vysoká škola obchodní (VŠO) or the UE became the alma mater and the stepping stone to further scientific, political or social career. The organisers’ aims were reflected in the suggested themes:

- The foundation of the business academy & its development as an institution
- The teaching of economics in the past 90 years
- The history of czech economic thinking and its leading figures
- Big names linked to the ue
- Academia under the pressure of circumstances or in unfree times

All these themes were covered by individual papers. There were, among others, biographies of prominent Czech (Czechoslovak) economists, descriptions of the teaching methods, analyses of ideologies by which the teaching of economics was often bound, and reflections on the role of the university in different political and social contexts. The closing part of the conference was dedicated to papers addressing the question: “*What kind of economics do we teach today and why?*”

The conference was officially started by F. Stellner (Vice Dean of FEPA, UE) on Wednesday 16th September at 4pm, and this was followed by the presentation of the main papers. The very first presentation was by **C. Albrecht** (Dean of the Getty

College of Arts and Sciences, Ohio Northern University, USA), titled *Two Transitions: The Origins and the End of the VŠO*. It offered a well-researched insight into our own history, unburdened by hagiographic tendencies. The paper examined the aims of higher education in economics and business in the Czech lands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the role of economics study in the law faculties and the growing interest in more specialised study in economic administration. It also analysed links among the development of a modern business curriculum in higher education, economic modernisation and the Czech national movement. Political and economic changes after WWII had a profound effect on the institutional setting in which business and economics education were conducted, as well as on the content of the curriculum and the personnel considered qualified to teach. Last but not least, the paper identified the key issues that emerged within the VŠO after 1945 and looked into the fundamental restructuring of higher education in business management that took place in 1948-1953.

Then **D. Tříška** (FEPA, UE) focused on the types of economics taught in the period of “real socialism” at the Institute of Economics at the Academy of Sciences. Dr. Tříška stressed that he considered himself to be no expert on the VŠO’s set-up, and that he wished to focus solely on alternative ways of studying economics under real socialism. He pointed to the scholarly papers that were being written at the Institute in this period and to the seminars led by Václav Klaus and popularly attended by students of the UE, who were coming to the Institute without much knowledge of the basic terms of economic theory. This paper brought about a fierce debate, joined in by those who were teaching or studying economics at the UE at the time, such as Z. Džbáňková, J. Koderová and M. Ševčík among others.

M. Ševčík (FEPA, UE) gave the final paper of the day: *The Teaching of Standard Economic Theory at the UE in the 1980s*. It is well worth mentioning that the names of subjects, within which standard economic theory was taught, tended to contain the word “critique”. The actual amount of criticism then depended on the lecturer. M. Ševčík emphasised the extent to which J. Petráček influenced the quality of the teaching of economic theories at the UE, which in turn transformed the institution. This occurred as early as in the mid-80s thanks to the new generation of lecturers and, therefore, the teaching of History of Economic Thinking required no fundamental changes post 1989. Despite this, however, it was this very subject that eventually lost out and is no longer taught as a compulsory subject.

The second day of the conference was divided thematically into four parts. The first group of papers was to do with the important figures linked with the VŠO and the beginning of Czech economic thinking.

I. Bažantová (Faculty of Law, Charles University) gave a paper on *Albín Bráf and the Origins of Czech Economic Thinking*. She focused on Bráf’s part in organising economics education at both college and university levels in the Czech lands and drew attention to the fact that it was Bráf who taught all prominent inter-war Czech economists and that all economics was taught according to his curriculum and his terminology.

M. Polášek (Faculty of Arts, Charles University) chose as his subject J. Macek and the role of economics within his framework of social theory and politics. M. Polášek only touched upon Macek’s actual economic proposals. Instead, he pursued mostly theoretical questions, namely Macek’s ideas about economic science and its

possibilities, the reconciliation of economics and Macek's philosophical utilitarianism and his socialist beliefs, the role of economics in politics, *etc.* The main message of his paper was that Macek regarded economics as a social science, as the chief method through which human society can be studied, and that he was convinced that anything to do with social life is the domain of economics, the only exception being national security, which falls into the realm of politics.

Z. Džbáňková (Faculty of Business Administration (FBA), UE) looked into the ethical aspects of the teachings of A. Bráf, J. Macek and K. Engliš. She introduced their principal works, where they deal with the relationship between economics and ethics, and she pointed out that it was J. Macek who created space in the Czech setting for a deeper analysis of A. Smith's work. She also emphasised the clear tendency within Czech economic thinking to strive towards an integrated interpretation of economics, including ethical matters. The following discussion included points such as Bráf's relationship with his contemporaries and the circumstances under which Macek left the UE. In the discussion that followed, J. Jirásek shared his memory of a particular lecture by Macek, during which Macek said that "*there are three kinds of a lie – a lie, an outright lie and statistics*".

M. Sekyrková (National Technical Museum, (NTM)) gave a paper on R. Hotowetz, a significant economist and an inter-war minister, basing her paper on documents from his estate, stored at the NTM Archive. She called attention to him as an economic advisor in numerous inter-war advisory boards to the government and to his involvement with the VŠO. And yet, he was one of those who, from their academic post, voiced their critical views of the economic policy of the time very openly.

The next part of the day consisted of papers on important figures linked to the UE.

Z. Hrdličková (Faculty of Economics, Masaryk's University) focused on Č. Kožušník and the ways in which he contributed to the history of Czech economic thinking. His research work falls into the periods of real socialism, his most important works date back to The Prague Spring in the 1960s, when he was a prominent theoretician on the subject of reforming the planned economy. Hrdličková's paper gave opportunity to look closely at the evolution of his theoretical views in the context of the times.

J. Koderová (Faculty of Finance and Accounting, UE) highlighted F. Vencovský as an expert in the field of monetary policy and as a significant researcher into Czech economic thinking. She made a mention of his principal works as well as his teaching at the UE, namely his lectures on Czech economic thinking.

F. Stellner (FEPA, UE) adopted a chronological approach to a presentation of scholars and events linked with the teaching of economic history at the UE. He explored the development of economic history as a subject, together with the main problems accompanying the running of the department, which from the 1950s focused on research into both national and international economics. The department had a special status within economic historiography until 1989 since it was the only place in Czechoslovakia oriented solely towards this scientific discipline.

The first afternoon session, titled *Economics in Unfree Times*, was full of very inspiring contributions. Its aim was to look in more detail at what was happening at the UE between the end of WWII and the early 1950s and then in the times of real socialism.

M. Devátá (Institute for Contemporary History, Academy of Sciences) presented a paper on *The University of Political and Economic Sciences and the Problem of (Dis)Continuity of Humanities and Arts in 1949–1953*. She outlined the evolution of humanities and arts after February 1948 in connection with the establishment of the Communist regime, political interference with university education and Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. She addressed the institutional reorganisation of the teaching of economic sciences and showed how the all-encompassing approach to Economics became curbed by subjects such as Ethics, Psychology, Sociology and Social Care having to give way to utilitarian subjects like Planning or Scientific Communism. Devátá demonstrated clearly how the substance of education changed completely under the pressure of the Communist ideology.

V. Němec (Association of Geoscientists for International Development), a student at the UE in 1948–1951, shared several personal memories and illustrated in detail the methods of study at the university then. Whereas “Post-February 1948” undergraduates did not experience difficulties in getting into universities, they witnessed first-hand the changes that followed. Not only did posters by the association of Catholic students started disappearing, as did the busts of Masaryk from the plinths, some lecturers and students began to vanish too, such as J. Macek *etc.*

J. Řezník (Philosophical Faculty, Palacký University (PF PU)) titled his paper *The Planning Department at the PFPU in 1949–1953* and called attention to the fact that steps were taken in the Post-February period to teach economic theory in other places apart from the UE. The Planning Department was founded as part of the plans to open the Faculty in 1948 and was led by J. Janiš. It ran a one-year course designed for the study of company and regional planning. One of the intentions was for those completing the course successfully to continue their studies at the UE.

The subsequent discussion revolved around questions such as who actually taught the newly implanted Marxism, what textbooks were used, what proportion of students and lecturers were affected by the post-February purges, and what role individual professors, *e.g.* J. Macek, played in them. V. Němec noted that UE graduates, like Hanzelka and Zikmund, popular travellers, increased the prestige of the UE at the time.

The last part of the day was dedicated to the ways in which Economics used to be taught.

L. Němcová (Council for Ethics in Economics) explained how the UE dealt with teaching Cooperative Ownership and Business Ethics. She clarified that Cooperative Ownership was lectured already prior to 1948 (J. Macek) and that there was a group of lecturers at the UE, led by Prof. Pernica, who engaged in teaching as well as partly researching Cooperative Ownership until 1968. Later on, the study and research of this topic were incorporated within relevant subjects elsewhere, among others at the Department of Domestic Trade (V. Doležal). After 1989 the Department of Small Business, led by J. Císař, encouraged the study of “The Role of Cooperative Ownership in Market Economy” as a subject in its own right again. And it was here that Business Ethics was lectured for the first time ever.

V. Škočová (Centre of Information and Library Services, UE) focused on what sources of information are available today to students of economics and to researchers into Czech Economic Thinking and Economic History.

Friday morning there was a follow-up of the previous afternoon, with discussion and the presented papers. The whole session bore the title: *What Sort of Economics Do We Teach Today?*

D. Lipka (FEPA, EU) considered carefully the ultimate question: *Why teach economics at all?* According to him, while everyone questions what sort of economics should be taught, hardly anyone asks himself why in fact we should teach it in the first place, what its purpose is, what role economics plays among other arts and humanities and what being an economist actually entails.

J. Soukup (FBA, UE) defined what the priorities underpinning the study of microeconomics at business-administration-oriented faculties are, what information is a key for courses in microeconomics, and what the graduate's profile should be. This was then discussed in more detail in the context of time allocation and the textbooks used for the study of relevant subjects. **D. Tríska** (FEPA, UE) explored the possibilities of applying economic theory in UE graduates' every-day working life. **T. Sedláček** (Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University) finished the session with his paper titled: *Economics in Crisis*. The discussion which ensued centred around three areas of questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between micro- and macroeconomic analysis? What is the definition of economics as a science? What is economics' own definition of its method?
- 2) How demanding are the requirements for a successful completion of the studies, including the dissertation? What textbooks are used and do students have and/or should they have access to alternative teachings and different methodologies?
- 3) To what extent are graduates from economics degrees able to put their theoretical knowledge into practice? How is the teaching of Economics set up in terms of Economic Theory vs. Economic Practice? To what degree can one learn to embrace economics as a method of decision making without getting stuck in the formula of profit maximization?

The contents of the conference will come out as a book, published this year. The publication will be divided into three parts: *From the History of an Institution, Chapters from the History of Czech Economic Thinking* and *What Sort of Economics Do We Teach?* The first part deals with the historical circumstances in which the VŠO was founded in 1919, and it addresses its transformation after 1945. The second section explores the teachings of Czech and Czechoslovak economists over the last 100 years. The last part of the book will offer different viewpoints and several answers to the question contained in its name. Just as not all economists agree on the definition of the terms "economics" and "economist", they also disagree over what the purpose of economics studies is. Individual chapters show clearly how our ideas today about what sort of economics should be taught differ from the visions of those who helped establish economics as an independent subject, or from the ideas of Josef Macek, one of the first professors at the VŠO. It suggests that discussions on this topic live on and that both the conference and the book can bring useful contribution to them.